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SEAMANSHIP AND THE MERCHANT MARINE

BY LINCOLN COLCORD

I

I SOMETIMES wonder, when reading the various schemes for the rehabilitation of our American merchant marine, how the great shore public thinks that the spirit of seamanship is suddenly going to be rehabilitated. A merchant marine is far more than a fleet of ships; it is quite as much the men who run them, as the ships themselves; but, above all, it is the concrete expression of an extensive maritime impulse and activity in the nation at large. A non-maritime nation may suppose that if it takes the notion to build a fleet of steamers, it will have a merchant marine; but nothing could be farther from the truth. The ships must compete with the ships of other nations, and for this they must have wise legislation; they must be handled safely and successfully, and for this they must have a race of seamen to man them. Wise nautical legislation cannot come out of a non-maritime country; and, as for a race of seamen, this is a factor which cannot be created in a day or even in a generation.

In the past we had a splendid race of seamen, but it has now died out; the traditions of the sea have lapsed in those homes where once they were the sole romantic food for the ambitions of the young. So completely has the era passed by, so alien to our present ways and occupations does it seem, that it is hard for us even to imagine a day when the major activity of the land was expressed in nautical terms, when old and young lived in a world of shipping, wrapped up in a whole order of duties, affairs and purposes which have now been cast aside. Can such a situation be again brought about in full force by any decree of business or desire of democ-

racy? The answer is that it cannot be brought about at all, in the sense in which the country at present conceives the problem; if we are to become a maritime people once more, the movement must bring itself about, as it were, through a process of slow and natural growth. To take a few city-bred boys and give them a term on a training ship does not make seamen of them, and does not tend to attract towards the seafaring profession a body of the most spirited and ambitious young men in the country. It is a grave question if, under present conditions in the nautical world, such a body of young men would ever be attracted towards the seafaring profession. These conditions must first be modified, before such a consummation is possible; and this will add still another delay to the normal growth of a sound merchant marine.

It seems to have been forgotten that the position of shipmaster on the high seas is one of positively unique responsibilities, demanding unique qualifications and powers. The popular imagination compares the shipmaster to the railroad engineer; the latter takes his train, loaded with sleeping passengers, through the night, the former steers his ship over the seas. It is felt that the master's position must in some way be comparable to a position on land bearing a superficial resemblance to it; so that his work may be spoken of in land terms and grasped in land ideas. This attitude is an unmistakable sign that we are no longer a maritime people, such as we were even fifty years ago. The present shore public does not comprehend the problem, it does not sense the values; for the truth is that the position of shipmaster is comparable to no other position in life. It cannot be put into land terms, it cannot be grasped by land ideas. The railroad engineer is held to his course by a couple of rigid steel rails; another man opens the switch for him; his running orders are strict and definite, and full responsibility for them is borne by still another man; his engine is a mechanical body, fixed and regular in its actions. But the shipmaster sails at large, his orders are general rather than specific, he bears responsibility for the acts of others as well as for his own; while his engine, a floating ship, is a free thing as a whole—the freest thing that moves on land or sea.

For the proper handling of this instrument he must be a seaman, in the widest meaning of the word; and seamanship is part of a man's personality, a quality running in his blood.

Its reactions are instinctive; it is a sense like the sense of beauty or the sense of love; it is a special psychological state, bound up so closely with the traditions and lore of the sea, and depending so fully upon an experience with the world of waters, that any general decline in these factors cannot fail to affect the art itself. All sailors know how impossible it is for those not in true sympathy with nautical affairs to have an intelligent conception of nautical values, no matter how intelligent they may be with respect to terrestrial values and affairs. The problem is similar to that of trying to think in a foreign language; it demands more than an academic familiarity with the rules and terms. It demands the human touch of understanding, the involuntary response of knowledge and experience. All this, with reference to the nautical ideas of the shore world, is summed up for the sailor in the single word "landlubber." And this is exactly what I mean when I say that we are no longer a maritime people; we have become a nation of landlubbers.

It is popularly imagined to-day that sailors always have belonged to the irresponsible, devil-may-care class, and that to turn this class back to the sea would solve the whole problem. But those who hold such a view have failed utterly to grasp the significance of a movement wherein the whole spiritual and physical force of some of our strongest communities once flowed along maritime channels, as naturally as rivers with their tributary streams rising far back in the foothills flow into the sea. They have failed utterly to grasp the significance of that remarkable factor of the co-operative ownership of vessel property which, at the height of our maritime supremacy, extended throughout our seaboard communities. Many of the carpenters who worked in the ship-yards, many of the riggers who fitted a vessel's top-hamper, many of the sailmakers who cut out her first suit of sails, owned a thirty-second or a sixty-fourth of the vessel; and the way stood open for all of them to do the same. As soon as a boy left school, his ambition was confronted with a settled scheme of co-operative ownership which proposed to take him into partnership in some capacity with the powerful course of maritime affairs. And the young men who went to sea in the ships, and who a couple of generations ago formed the backbone of our magnificent merchant marine, were far from the riff-raff of their day. They were the same young men who to-day are going to college, are entering the

various engineering professions, are seeking an outlet for personal initiative in the field of industrialism. It was exactly along this line that the seafaring profession formerly offered them the widest scope.

To claim that the same set of circumstances obtains at present, and that a personnel such as we want will appear to man and officer our merchant marine, is both idle and ignorant. In applying land conditions to the seafaring life, in bringing the profession under the common rules of corporate control, the present day has absolutely changed the issue. Committed as we are to the principles of corporate ownership, and chimerical as it may be ever to expect a return of the old conditions of small competitive business, nevertheless there must be found some special and exceptional method of corporate management for our maritime affairs, conforming more wisely with the unique requirements of the seafaring profession, if we are to see a sound rehabilitation of the American merchant marine.

II

There was a day, within the memory of men still young, when the owners of a ship gave their master a complete and final authority over the handling of his vessel, and accepted his word upon any technical matter as the ruling of an experienced and reliable man. He was allowed great latitude; and when he disclosed incompetence, or when his judgment proved erroneous, he was promptly broken. Thus masters stood strongly and independently on their own feet; there was a pride in the profession, and a high standard of ability to be maintained. The rewards appealed to the best qualities of a man, the responsibilities brought out all that there was in him; and even the making of money, upon which the enterprise was necessarily founded, never crushed out the romance and sentiment, the sense of inward satisfaction, the reactions of a true art, which sprang from the keeping, handling and sailing of a ship under the old régime.

All this is essentially changed. To-day, the master of a steamer is nothing but a navigating officer. He takes his orders from the office, and gets the ship about from port to port; he has nothing whatever to do with her business and general nautical policy. His opinion is never asked, and counts for little if given. When orders miscarry, he must

bear as much of the blame as can be shoved off on him, either before the court of public opinion, or at the hands of the law. If the owners of a liner choose to have her make a record run, of what account would be the protests of a master who could speak only of such irrelevant things as wind and weather and the condition of the ice fields? Nothing but money talks in these offices. An incident well known in shipping circles is significant. On a terrible night a number of years ago when a certain passenger steamer was lost, it had already begun to snow before she left the dock. Her master went into the shore office. "Gentlemen, I'm afraid it is too thick to go outside to-night," he said. "Why, Captain," was the answer, "it isn't blowing hard." "A northeaster is making up the coast," said the man who knew what he was talking about. "You cannot depend upon such a storm—it may do anything." Then some one said—some one in authority: "What's the matter, Captain, are you getting afraid?" The master looked at him. "No," he answered after a while, "I'm not getting afraid." He left the office and took his steamer to sea, into the face of a November storm without parallel. Neither the vessel nor any of her company were heard from again.

From all such circumstances, well recognized among seafaring men, it comes about with them that the very habit of independent action is undermined. There is no use in a man's butting his head more than once into a wall. A superior position has been subordinated; discipline is hard hit at the head of the line, where the blow is most disastrous. A strong pressure bears constantly upon the profession either to eliminate independent men or to crush out their spirit of independence. It would be far from my intention to criticise individual cases. There is a large body of men, for instance, in the American merchant marine, left over from the sailing ship days, who find themselves growing old, who are beyond the age of taking up a new profession, and who yet cannot afford to throw up their jobs. They are all good men; but they are not such good men as they once were, or as they still would be under a régime of free initiative. And the younger generation of seafaring men simply does not know what it means to handle a ship under a régime of free initiative. The result is a gradual decline in the spirit and fiber of seamanship. This is the problem which goes to the heart of modern unsafety on the sea.

III

The problem in the merchant marine is analogous to that which confronts our Navy. Our departments of naval management and operation stand like two unfortunate parties to a matrimonial disaster, utterly divorced by a quarrel which never can be reconciled. The policy and general management of the Navy are, in the peculiar nature of our administrative system, entrusted absolutely to an official who, if he is not always a politician and patronage-monger, is invariably a landlubber; and this official is furthermore hampered by a confusion and general lack of powers, particularly with respect to the financial control of the Navy. On the other hand, the operation of the Navy is necessarily under the control of seamen.

The quarrel, I say, is irreconcilable. And I would without hesitation lay down the broad statement that until the landlubber element is eliminated from the situation—that is, until our administrative system is so changed that line officers have the final authority in all naval matters, and until our Navy Department is measurably freed from a financial dependence upon the whims and political influences of Congress—we cannot hope to have either an efficient Navy or a sound naval policy. Even though we had the ships, it would be quite another thing to win battles with them. A bare fleet may be well enough for diplomatic purposes; but when the bluff has been called and the action begins, it is the balance between ships and personnel, between management and operation, between policy and exigency, which determines the victory. Seamanship then assumes its proper place at the head of the line; and it is nothing but seamanship, in the true and comprehensive meaning of the term, which should control the naval situation from the Secretary of the Navy down.

In the case of the merchant marine, we have the same incongruous elements: management by landlubbers, operation by seamen. With the merchant marine there are no periods of inaction, no games of diplomacy, no bluff; the war is always on. Thus the defects in the service are constantly being brought out, and their causes show plainly enough to the candid eye. The situation might be remedied by requiring the managers of steamship companies to serve a term at sea, and acquire some experience in the exceptional work with which they have to deal; they might go before an

examining board, and receive a certificate of seamanship entitling them to hold such and such managerial positions. I make the suggestion in all seriousness. The ship-master must show a proper term of experience, and pass the board, before he gets his papers; to permit any less, or to allow a man to command a vessel without his papers, would to-day be unthinkable. Yet with all the master's certificates and experience, the final authority over the handling of his vessel is permitted to rest with a man of whom no technical knowledge whatever is required. For the actual need, it should be self-evident that no man is competent to manage a line of steamers who has not served his time on the sea.

I am not claiming that the men of the old régime were intrinsically more wise, upright or unselfish than the men who make up the present-day business world; I am only pointing out that a definite and stringent set of circumstances operated with them in the directions of a system more beneficial to the public welfare. The individualism of pioneer days was a far different thing from the individualism of our complex modern society; and the reaction of individualism upon small competitive business conditions was, in its most important phases, diametrically opposite to its reaction upon monopolistic business conditions. In these two sets of forces there is all the difference between a responsible individualism and an irresponsible individualism, between a legitimate free initiative and an illegitimate free initiative. Thus it is a fact that the early individualism of our ship owners, expressed in terms of direct, simple and enlightened relations between owner and master, made for freedom of personal initiative all along the line; while the individualism of modern ship owners, expressed in terms of absentee ownership, banker directorship, business managership, and strictly shore ideas, makes for the crushing out of all initiative save the corporate initiative of the owning body.

IV

It is comparatively easy for us, who belong by birth and training to the old maritime régime, to exaggerate the importance of that particular phase of seafaring which we know so well. But I would disclaim all sentimentality in the consideration of these matters. The pioneer days of America have gone; the days of small competitive business have gone. The

sailing ships have gone, taking with them into the limbo of outworn enterprises many of their traditions and the most of their tremendous lore—the detail of sails and rigging, of knots and splices, of tackles and falls, the knowledge of wind and weather, the special sense of the ship's condition under sail, the wisdom in laying out her course, the judgment in guiding her daily contest with the wind, the watchfulness in storms, the tenfold responsibility in the neighborhood of land—all that a seaman once had at his finger tips, and that easily might be compassed within an ordinary day's work on the sea. The phase has passed, and in human probability it will never appear again. The steamer holds a straight course through wind and weather; the engine room supplies the motive power; and I can see no practical need for the master of a steamer to acquire more than a smattering of the old sailing ship lore. Except in the way of culture, it would be valueless to him. The master's work is easier to-day than it used to be; he does not require his former wide and detailed knowledge to be able to perform it. And if he had never seen or heard of a sailing ship, he still might become the most capable of steamship masters.

And yet something must be found to take the place of the old hard training, though I do not quite see what it is to be. Ships and commerce have changed, but the sea remains, one of the great elemental factors which we have not been able to industrialize or even to civilize. It remains in its majestic power and freedom, in its alluring grandeur, in its dangerous caprice, ready to wreak a sudden vengeance for the presumption of man. It remains with the terrors of night, with fog and the dangers of collision, with reef and hurricane and tidal wave, with unforeseen attack, with unknown force, with unfathomable strategy. It remains with the unexpected—ever the unexpected. And to-day, as it always has been and always will be, those only are at home upon its waters who love and understand it, who sense in some degree its values, who feel when it is to be feared and when it is to be trusted, whose instincts measurably answer the silent voices of the sea.

Their true certificate is an eternal vigilance. If I were asked to put the quality of seamanship into a word, I should define it as a constant readiness for the emergency. In the emergency lies the incipient accident; and it is through the quick and proper handling of the emergency that the accident

is avoided. The quick and proper handling of the emergency—it calls for the best that a man may bring of human character. It calls for more than efficiency or capability, for more than technical knowledge, for more, even, than experience. It calls for seamanship, a quality of the soul. And such a quality may be attained only by stern self-discipline, by a training in technicalities so arduous that action becomes involuntary and unerring, and by the sure possession of that self-confidence which springs from nothing but the free exercise of a man's personal initiative.

I have spoken of culture, of the cultural value of the old sea training; and by culture I mean something higher than refinement, elegance, or good taste. It was exactly this value which lent such dignity to the old maritime régime, which gave our seafaring men of the older generations such clear-cut personalities, such breadth and depth of character, such a Roman stamp. But these were not naturally men of an extraordinary type; their greatness was thrust upon them, as it were, by the conditions and circumstances of the life they lived. Each phase of it contributed directly to the sum-total of character, so that they broadened and deepened unconsciously, and became seamen without fully knowing what they did. Their profoundest virtue lay in that they came to honor the work for itself alone. They carried on a tradition of true pride, without which no workers are worthy and no work is well done. They kept faith with themselves, their stern and honorable taskmasters. They were sincere. But, with lessened conditions and circumstances on the sea, a man no longer is made into a seaman in spite of himself. If he would discover to-day that grasp of seamanship, and through this of character, which the older generations of seafaring men possessed, he must win it voluntarily, by a process of hard study, by deliberate thought, and by all that makes for a man's inward enlightenment.

This touches the universal problem of democracy—the constant danger, the wonderful opportunity. The old maritime régime was a close aristocracy of worth and fitness. The modern régime is a loose democracy, with all a democracy's tendency to level requirements to fit the man instead of to raise the man to fit the requirements. The sea problem is nothing but the shore problem with lights heightened and shadows darkened; in that simpler environment, cause and effect stand out boldly against an open horizon,

against a skyline unbroken by the works of man. And the same argument, with respect to the growth of an unwise corporate control which I have advanced in the case of seaman-ship, may be urged with equal force for any line of business ashore. The problem everywhere is not to destroy the corporation, but to bring about a fairer and more natural form of corporate control; to cause, through corporate control, a return to certain conditions which most men agree are better for the individual and for the public welfare than those in which we now find ourselves—conditions which we have temporarily lost sight of in our thoughtless scramble for mere size and power.

I cannot but feel that the main problem, both for the seafaring profession and for democracy at large, revolves about the single question of discipline. Out of discipline grows self-discipline; out of responsibility grows wisdom. And out of our new freedom must grow a higher and truer submission, a submission to self-imposed duties, if our best hopes are not to be dashed at some rapidly approaching day. This form of submission, strange as it may appear in the outright phrase, is precisely what was produced by the old aristocratic régime which we have been discussing. And I think it yet remains to be proved that the true democracy is not to be an ideal aristocracy.

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